

Aid for legitimacy: São Tomé and Príncipe hand in hand with Taiwan

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Today, China is the second biggest economy in the world. Not only does the US buy and want to 'sell all kinds of stuff to China',¹ but the entire world is interested in doing business with Beijing. Yet, São Toméans chose an alternative path. São Tomé and Príncipe established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1975, after becoming independent from Portugal. Relations between both countries developed in a regular fashion and without much to report until 1997, the year the São Toméan government and Taiwanese authorities signed a joint communiqué establishing diplomatic relations between them. Since celebrating diplomatic relations entails the recognition of the other as a credible and legitimate political body, in 1997 São Tomé and Príncipe recognized not only Taiwan's sovereignty as a state, but also its territorial claims in the People's Republic of China, Mongolia, the small Russian republic of Tuva and other pieces of land administered by several states in the region. The recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state entailed complying with its territorial claims and supporting its credibility and ultimately its political behavior. Afterwards, without much surprise China suspended all diplomatic relations with São

Tomé and Príncipe as it broke the principle of the 1975 communiqué signed between both countries, where São Tomé and Príncipe recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate government in representation of the whole of China. Nevertheless, even though China is a highly attractive player with whom to do business with, São Tomé and Príncipe's recognition of the legitimacy of the Taiwanese government has brought substantial and constant financial support and investment to the country throughout the last decade. Indeed, although China is an economic heavyweight, small countries with meager budgets have the option to recognize states whose sovereignty is contested in the international arena in order to garner financial support either directly from the state seeking legitimacy or from a 'patron' state. São Tomé and Príncipe is a small island state in the Atlantic off the coast of Gabon, in the Gulf of Guinea. Its population is estimated at approximately 163.000 people and its GDP at US\$187 million,² making São Tomé and Príncipe one of the poorest countries in the world, according to IMF data. On the other hand, Taiwan counts approximately 23 million people and a GDP that is higher than Norway's, one of Europe's more developed countries.

1 "Hu Jintao and Barack Obama's conjuring trick" (*BBC News*, 20 January 2011).

2 São Tomé and Príncipe country report, Global Finance.



Thus, providing financial assistance to a country like São Tomé and Príncipe in exchange for political recognition is not a problem but an agenda for Taiwan.

This game of trading political recognition for financial aid has also been used by the tiny Pacific island of Nauru, which recognized the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, an action which granted Nauru an appreciation token of US\$50 million in Russian humanitarian aid.³ The idea underpinning this trade game is very straightforward: since sovereignty is not legitimized by a country's wealth or the size of its population but by the international community – meaning a state is always a state regardless of size or economic indicators – São Tomé and Príncipe and Nauru were able to offer credibility and a degree of legitimacy to these disputed territories in exchange for the financial compensation their countries desperately need. In the case of São Tomé and Príncipe, financial aid assures nothing short of its budget's very survivability.

The political commitment substantiating this relationship is highly visible, with top level meetings occurring on a regular basis. São Toméan President Fradique de Menezes attended none other than the Taiwan National Day celebrations on October 10th 2010,⁴ where he met his counterpart Ma Ying-jeou. Attending the commemorations of a national day of a country most of the world does not recognize as legitimate is a symbolic manifestation of ultimate support to the Taiwanese cause. Already on October 27th 2010, Taiwanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Timothy Yang visited São Tomé and Príncipe, where he inaugurated an electrical power plant and discussed a new phase of cooperation between both countries, involving the energy, health and agriculture sectors. Following the Minister's visit, on November 2nd 2010 São Toméan Minister of Finance and International Cooperation Américo Ramos made a declaration stating

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the country's continued support for Taiwan and defending that it is a "sovereign state, which carries rights and duties equal to that of any other state on the international arena".⁵ São Tomé and Príncipe has stated in several international forums that Taiwan should have a seat at the UN General Assembly and in any other bodies of the organization, apart from the Security Council. However, notwithstanding any existing political ties of friendship and mutual commercial interest, São Tomé and Príncipe survives as an economic entity only by relying on foreign aid, not on domestic revenue. For example, 93% of its 2011 budget will be assured by external financial donations,⁶

a share so immense that it leaves São Tomé and Príncipe no other alternative but to craft an array of deals with different countries and regions, which then back its budget and assure its survival. It is thus unsurprising that São Toméan Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada paid a four-day visit to Taiwan between January 12th and 15th 2011,⁷ in order to enhance bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Evidently, the high success of these meetings and the nature of the deals made between a contested political region and a sovereign state enable the continuation of this type of arrangements due to their highly profitable political and financial character.

The availability of countries keen on making these types of deals also immensely benefits regions seeking sovereignty or legitimacy, much like Taiwan. Due to its disputes with the

People's Republic of China, Taiwan is unable to celebrate diplomatic ties with many countries, since they recognize the legitimacy of China and have diplomatic ties with it. In fact, Taiwan is not recognized by any of the powers with a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, much of the UN General Assembly does not deal politically with Taiwan and only one European state – the Vatican

3 "Tiny Nauru struts world stage by recognizing breakaway republics" (*Guardian*, 14 December 2010).

4 "Double Ten party sees hundreds of foreign dignitaries" (*Taipei Times*, 11 October 2010).

5 "São Tomé e Príncipe e Taiwan apoiam-se mutuamente" (*Jornal ST*, 2 November 2010).

6 "São Tomé e Príncipe: Orçamento de Estado dá um terço às obras públicas" (*Jornal ST*, 6 January 2011).

7 "President Ma meets Sao Tome and Principe prime minister Patrice Emery Trovoada" (*News Releases/Office of the Republic of China (Taiwan)*, 14 January 2010).



– recognizes Taiwan’s legitimacy, in response to China’s communist policy of state controlled religion. Although the US does not recognize Taiwan *de jure*, there is an understanding between the two countries which obliges the US to refrain from recognizing one regime over the other. Yet, due to public support for Taiwan in the US, the latter maintains some level of unofficial representation in Taiwanese territory.

It becomes clear how this process of exchanging recognition for financial support provides a win-win situation for both São Tomé and Príncipe and Taiwan. Since there is no absolute certainty in arguing that China would provide the same help to São Tomé and Príncipe if it stopped recognizing Taiwan while the former’s entire economic system is dependent on foreign financial support, for the time being the privileged relationship the country maintains with Taiwan is nothing but an advantage for the functioning of São Tomé and Príncipe as a state.

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